

Community Assistantship Program

Rice County Focus Group Meetings for Trails- Final Report

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Rice County Focus Group Meetings for Trails- Final Report

Conducted on behalf of
Mill Towns Trail

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CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION

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Introduction

Throughout Minnesota trails are being used for recreation, education, and transportation. In various regions of the state, they are spurring economic development and creating a sense of community pride. Furthermore, they are providing opportunities for individuals to enjoy nature and are contributing to the development of a greater appreciation for natural resources.

As trails are being planned, built, and used on an increasing basis, their management is becoming more complex. Locally and nationally the number of trail users and the different types of trails users demand are expanding. These changes are consistent with the general increase in demands placed on natural resources throughout the state¹.

To begin to address the demands of all trail users in Rice County, the Mill Towns Trail Board hosted a series of focus group meetings in February of 1999. These focus groups were designed as brainstorming sessions for individuals interested in an integrated, county-wide trail system. The primary goals of the brainstorming sessions were to identify desired destinations and routes for trails throughout the county.

Letters of invitation were sent to city council members, county commissioners, local newspapers, township board members, city administrators, a bike association, a watershed association, and local cable networks. A total of 24 individuals attended the focus groups. During the focus groups, participants answered a series of questions. Throughout the evening's discussion the participants were instructed to think big and integrated. A primary objective of the meetings was to include as many different user types as possible in order to reduce user conflicts in future stages of planning and implementation.

The desired destinations indicated by the participants can be categorized into scenic areas, current wilderness and recreational areas, towns and cities, and restaurants. Participants specified two types of trail, both bituminous and gravel, as necessary for a variety of activities including hiking, biking, snowmobiling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, walking, and jogging. Primary reasons cited by participants for avoiding trail development in specific areas included safety concerns, conflicting uses, and regulation. Areas participants considered to be "sure bets" for trail development included wilderness and recreational areas, county and state highway right of way, and property donations.

¹ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Directions for Natural Resources: An Ecosystem-Based Framework for Setting Natural Resource Management Priorities*, Strategic Plan, July 1997.

Methods

On February 15, 18, and 22, 1999 focus group meetings were held for individuals interested in an integrated, county-wide trail system. Three different sites were chosen for the focus groups in an effort to make it convenient for interested parties to participate in the brainstorming sessions. These sites were the Morristown City Hall, Bridgewater Township Hall, and Faribault City Hall. Letters of invitation were sent to city council members, county commissioners, local newspapers, township board members, city administrators, a bike association, a watershed association, and local cable networks (see Appendix 1 to view the letter of invitation). Press releases were sent with each invitation (see Appendix 2 to view the press release).

The goals of the meetings were:

1. to have interested citizens identify trail connections they would like made,
2. to identify land that could be used for trails,
3. to identify routes essential for long distance travel by a variety of users, and
4. to identify points of interest or desired destinations (i.e. parks, historical/cultural sites, and vistas).

The format planned for each of the focus groups was identical. Each began with an introduction and explanation of how the meeting would proceed. This included explaining the purpose of a focus group, explaining who would receive the information gathered in the meeting, asking the participants to think big and in terms of an integrated trail system throughout the evening's discussion, and outlining the role of the Mill Towns Trail Board in advocating for additional trails. See Appendix 3 for the agenda.

After the introduction and explanation were completed, participants were asked a series of questions. The questions and the exercises used for each question are as follows:

Questions

1. Where to do you want to go? What are some points of interest? (i.e. parks, historical/cultural sites, town, existing trails, natural areas, lakes, and vistas).
 - Have participants make a list of places they would like to go.
 - Use a map of Rice County and a highlighter and have participants mark the listed points on the map.
2. How do you want to get to those places? Identify types of transportation and routes.
 - Use a map of Rice County and highlighter and have participants draw the possible routes to the points they have specified.
3. Are there routes that are essential for long distance bikers, hikers, runners, or snowmobilers, etc.?
 - Using a map of Rice County and a highlighter have the participants identify the routes that are essential for long distance travel.
4. Are there areas where landowners or participants know that land is available for trails?
 - Use flip chart to record responses from the participants.

5. Are there areas that should be avoided? Why?

- Mark spots on the map and/or record responses on a flip chart.

Results

In total, 24 individuals participated in the focus groups. One individual attended the first focus group at the Morristown City Hall, 10 attended the second at the Bridgewater Township Hall, and 13 attended the final meeting at the Faribault City Hall. In the case where one individual attended, the five questions were asked in dialogue format. In the two remaining focus groups the individuals were broken into two groups per meeting. The same five questions were asked in all of the meetings, regardless of the number of participants. Answers to each of the questions are as follows:

Where to do you want to go?

The following is a list of the places individuals want to go. Some of the locations of these areas are marked with a star on a map of Rice County in Appendix 4.

Wilderness and Recreational Areas

- River Bend Nature Center
- Nerstand Big Woods State Park
- Cannon Lake
- Cannon Valley Wilderness Area
- Sakata Singing Hills Trail
- Carleton Arboretum
- Boyd Wildlife Management Area
- Cedar Lake Scientific and Natural Area
- River Bend Trails
- City Trails
- State Parks
- Townsend Woods Scientific and Natural Area
- McKnight Prairie
- Circle Lake
- Cedar Lake
- Trout Lily Scientific and Natural Area
- Lake Byllesby Regional Park
- Cannon Valley Trail
- Caron County Pfark

Towns and Cities

- Medford Mall
- Northfield
- Webster
- Veseli
- Waseca
- Rivers
- Faribault
- Cannon Falls

Restaurants

- Dairy Queen (Faribault and Northfield)
- Ole Store (Northfield)
- L and M (Dundas)
- Blue Horse (Millersberg)
- Country Crossing (Randolph)

Scenic Areas

- Lakes
- Woods
- Iron Bridge (Waterford)
- Apple Orchard

How do you want to get to those places? Identify types of transportation and routes.

The suggested routes from each of the maps completed during the meetings have been compiled on a map of Rice County and can be viewed in Appendix 4. A master map can be viewed in Appendix 5. This map contains the routes that were repeatedly chosen and/or the routes to points of interest identified by participants.

Are there areas where landowners or participants know that land is available for trails? This question evolved into "are there areas that are 'sure bets' for trails?"

- River Bend Nature Center
- Cannon Valley Wilderness Area
- Sakatah Singing Hills Trail
- Existing Snowmobile and other uses trails
- Landfill
- Prowe Park on 38
- Highway right-of-way (state and county)
- State Land—Heritage Forest

Are there areas that should be avoided? Why?

- Existing snowmobile trails for paved trails. Because paving snowmobile trails causes conflicts.
- Nerstrand State Park for bikes. Because bikes are not allowed in the park
- Cannon Valley Wilderness Areas for bikes and horses. Because there are no bikes allowed in the park and no horses from the east end.
- Highway 21 northwest to Shieldsville for bikes. Because the road is in bad condition and the traffic is heavy.
- Highway 3 between Northfield and Faribault for bikes. The shoulder is okay but there is a lot of traffic and it is not a good place for family trips.
- Highway 19 for bikes because it is narrow and has a lot of traffic.
- Highway 45 to Owatonna for bikes because it is too narrow and hilly.
- Highway 60 parking lot by DQ for bikes, because it is not safe for families

Analysis

The focus groups revealed that the areas individuals want to travel to by trail fall into a few categories—scenic areas, current wilderness or recreational areas, towns and cities, and restaurants. The routes that individuals chose to reach these areas generally followed either existing roads or water ways. Individuals discussed a variety of uses including walking, jogging, hiking, snowmobiling, biking, cross-country skiing, and horse back riding. As a result, two distinct types of trail emerged—a gravel and a permanent bituminous trail. In most cases, individuals recognized that the type of trail that would be designated in any one area would depend on the terrain, current restrictions (i.e. state

park regulations), and landowner preferences. Appendix 4 shows all of the possible routes indicated by participants and Appendix 5 shows the routes that were continually chosen or connectors to points of interest that were mentioned repeatedly.

Most of the areas that were considered "sure bets" for a trail were lands currently designated for wilderness conservation or recreation. Exceptions included state and county road right-of-way, individual land donations (Deit and Peggy Prowe land on Co. Rd. 38), and the borders of the landfill near the Cannon Valley Wilderness Area. Areas that were identified as "to be avoided" included roads that are in need of maintenance, areas where certain uses were prohibited by regulations, areas that were unsafe for families to travel, and areas that were currently dominated by another user.

Attendance at the focus groups covered a wide spectrum of users and interested parties. Bikers, joggers, walkers, horseback riders, cross-country skiers, a state park manager, snowmobilers, a city administrator, a city parks and recreational department employee, city council members, and a local park administrator represented the interests of their groups and/or communities. In general, however, bikers and cross-country skiers had the greatest representation.

Recommendations

- Expand funding for trails throughout the county.
- Seek matching funds from the state for trail improvements or additions in existing wilderness and recreational areas. Work within the goals, mandates, and missions of these areas to enhance trail usage.
- Expand current trail systems in cities and towns throughout the county.
- Whenever possible develop partnerships or manage user conflicts and ensure that all parties have adequate usage opportunities.
- Create a trail pass system so that users pay for the maintenance of the trail. Similar to the ski passes. This was a suggestion made by participants throughout the meetings.
- Participants suggested making wider shoulders on roads, and painting in lines so that bikers can ride safely along the side of the road.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter of Invitation

Appendix 2: Press Release

Appendix 3: Agenda for Rice County Focus Group Meetings

Appendix 4: Map of Rice County with all desired routes and points of interest

Appendix 5: Master Map of Rice County with most popular routes and points of interest

Appendix 1: Letter of
Invitation

January 29, 1999

Dear,

The Mill Towns Trail Board, the directing body of the Mill Towns Trail non-profit organization, is planning three focus group meetings that will be used to identify the need for and interest in expanding multi-use trails in Rice County. We are inviting all interested parties to participate in these meetings. It is our hope that you will extend our invitation to individuals or parties within your organization, district, or township who would be interested. The information gathered in these meetings will be compiled for the use of future decision-makers in Rice County. It is hoped that these meetings will help highlight possible routes, points of interest, and possibly even available land for the consideration of future decision-makers.

The dates, times, and locations for the three focus group meetings are February 15th (7:00-8:30 p.m.) at Morristown City Hall, February 18th (7:00-8:30 p.m.) at Bridgewater Township Hall, or February 22nd (7:30-9:00 p.m.) at Faribault City Hall.

Attached you will find a press release that announces the focus group meetings. It can be used in any publication or correspondence you feel addresses individuals and parties interested in multi-use trails in Rice County.

If you have questions please call Jennifer Ringold at (507) 645-3002 (Monday or Friday) or Peggy Prowe at (507) 645-8261.

Sincerely,

Mill Towns Trail Board

★ ★ ★ ★ Press Release ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Where do you want to go?"

Come help the Mill Towns Trail Board answer this question by participating in one of three focus groups held February 15th (7:00-8:30 p.m.) at Morristown City Hall, February 18th (7:00-8:30 p.m.) at Bridgewater Township Hall, or February 22nd (7:30-9:00 p.m.) at Faribault City Hall.

The purpose of these focus groups is to identify the need for and interest in multi-use trails in Rice County.

If you have questions please contact Jennifer Ringold (507) 645-3002 (Mon. or Fri.) or Peggy Prowe (507) 645-8261.

Cookies and Coffee will be served!

Appendix 3: Agenda for Rice County Focus Group Meetings

“Where do you want to go?”—Focus Group Meeting

February 15, Morriston City Hall

February 18, Bridgewater Township Hall

February 22, Faribault City Hall

Agenda

I. Welcome

Purpose of meeting

Visioning and Integrated Trails—I encourage you to think BIG!

II. Introductions

III. Making Tracks

Role of the Mill Towns Trail Board

Number of Meetings

Process of Growing a Trail

Follow-up

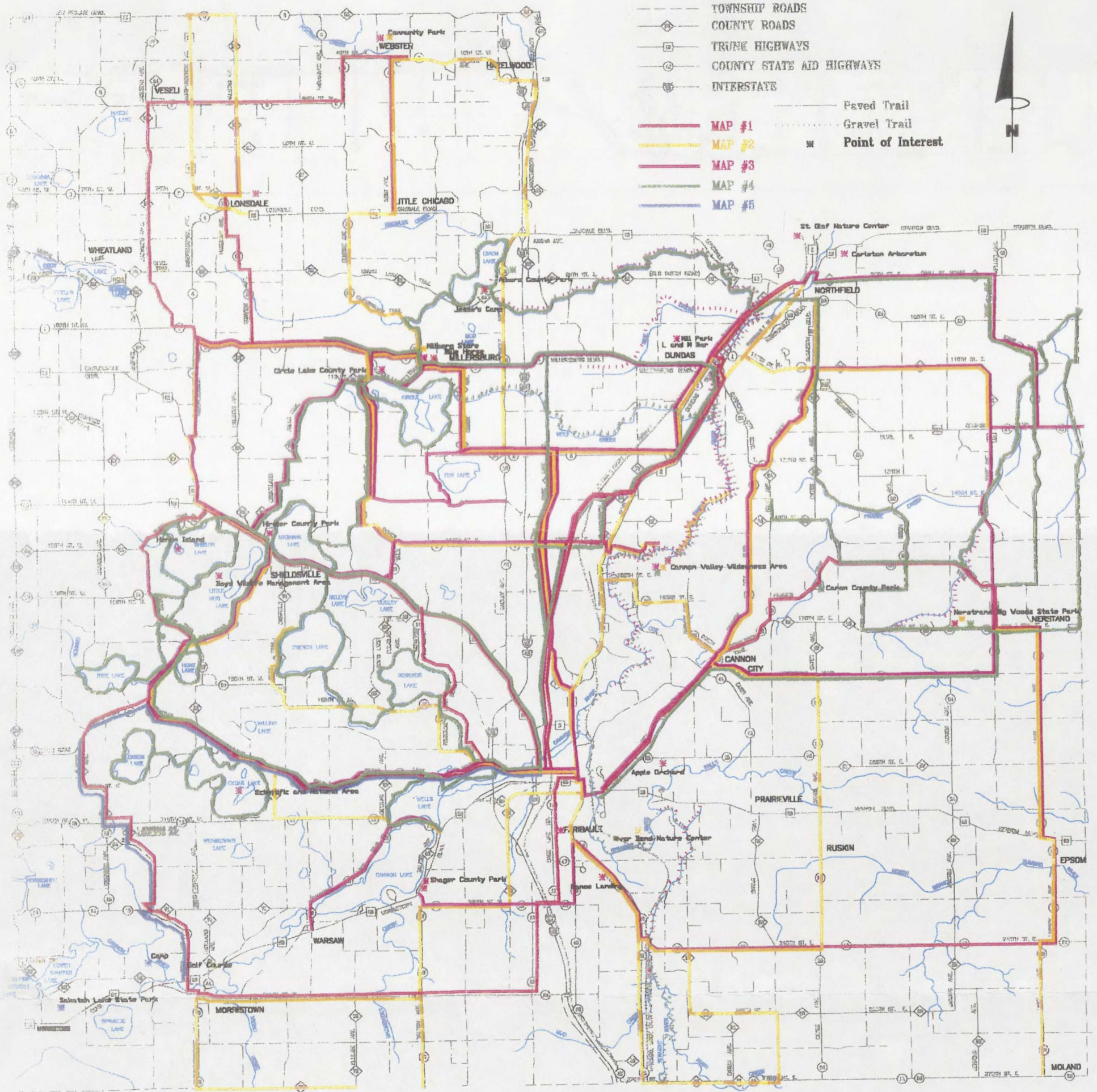
IV. Questions

V. Closing Remarks

RICE COUNTY, MINNESOTA

KEY

- TOWNSHIP ROADS
- COUNTY ROADS
- TRUNK HIGHWAYS
- COUNTY STATE AID HIGHWAYS
- INTERSTATE
- Paved Trail
- Gravel Trail
- Point of Interest
- MAP #1
- MAP #2
- MAP #3
- MAP #4
- MAP #5



Appendix 5: Map of Rice County with most popular routes and points of interest

RICE COUNTY, MINNESOTA

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- TOWNSHIP ROADS
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